

# “Auld Licht, New Licht” and Original Secessionists in Scotland and Ulster

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## Introduction

Some expressions relating to our historical past, once encountered, have an almost unforgettable quality. This is so even if contact with them is brief, and the concepts to which they refer imperfectly understood. In this respect, the package of inter-related terms “Auld Licht”/“New Licht” and “Burgher”/“Anti Burgher” is a prime example. Almost certainly their resonance owes much to a couthy charm (particularly the repeated velar fricative and “rolled r”) as part of a Scots vernacular heritage; while at the same time entrenching in the popular imagination a “dour” Presbyterian mindset, one deemed prone to pedantry, bigotry and internal strife. This popular perception perhaps finds epitome in the example of the “Auld Licht Anti Burghers”, the bicentenary of whose founding occurs in August 2006.

The historical processes providing a background to “Old and New Light” have received considerable recent review – notably Enlightenment “Age of Reason” thought permeating society; while in relation, there seems little doubt that perceived Erastian and anti-subscriptionist trends within the Established Church of Scotland provoked the “First Secession” of 1733. Some recent studies have observed the Calvinist-eroding factors of liberalism and incipient Voluntaryism altering Secessionist thinking before 1800.<sup>1</sup> It is hardly surprising if the Auld Licht factions have remained under-investigated

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<sup>1</sup> For example, S. J. Brown, “Religion and the Rise of Liberalism: The First Disestablishment Campaign in Scotland”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 48, no. 4 (1997).

since the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> their very names seeming to invite labelling and dismissal as eccentrics. By contrast, the commencement of the debate within early eighteenth-century “mainstream” Presbyterianism has been well documented – but largely by Ulster-Scots Presbyterian historians whose province served as crucible for the contest.<sup>3</sup>

The following account begins by examining the wider background to the situation in Ulster. Some comment is then afforded on an apparently dormant Old Light cause during the Moderate ascendancy in Scotland. More attention, however, is given to the rekindling of Old Light by reactionary Secessionists, and in turn by Establishment Evangelicals (who nonetheless rarely owned the term) – groups by the century’s end increasingly concerned at “corrupting” trends in church and society. Extensive use has been made of David Scott’s work on the Original Secession Church. Scott was Free Church minister of Saltcoats, and his *Annals of the Original Secession Church*, eulogising though it is, is valuable for the statistical appendices and the reproduction of documents, mostly now lost in original form, which comprise almost 80% of the work.<sup>4</sup>

### **The “specious pretence” of New Light – early counteraction**

The development of New Light owed much to archetypal Enlightenment philosophy emphasising freedom of conscience and rationality in religion, over compulsion and “outmoded” dogma. Often associated with the 1730s Great Awakening in the American colonies, the term had antecedents in seventeenth-century Ulster. In February 1649, the Ulster Presbytery (successor to the recent Scottish “Army

<sup>2</sup> T. M’Crie, *Life of Thomas M’Crie DD* (Edinburgh, 1840); J. McKerrow, *History of the Secession Church* (Edinburgh, 1842); D. Scott, *Annals and Statistics of The Original Secession Church* (Edinburgh, 1887).

<sup>3</sup> Notably vol. 3 of J. Scaton Reid & W. D. Killen, *History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (1853), and, recently, a comprehensive overview by Finlay Holmes, *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland: A Popular History* (Dublin, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Scott wrote almost a half-century after M’Crie and McKerrow.

Presbytery”) denounced Rump Parliament proposals on religious toleration as “damnable errors under the specious pretence of a Gospel-way and New Light”.<sup>5</sup> However, it was in relation to later events involving churchmen of a “bookish disposition” in the Province<sup>6</sup> that the term came into more common usage; notably after the Rev. John Abernethy published in December 1719 a sermon entitled “Religious obedience founded on *Personal Persuasion*”.

Abernethy was a leading member of the Belfast Society, a group of highbrow clergy formed in 1705 within the Synod of Ulster (itself the outgrowth of the Ulster Presbytery), and critical of subscription to “man-made” confessions, particularly the Westminster Confession, and the keenness of Church authorities (Synod of Ulster, and its “mother” Church of Scotland) to enforce it in the years 1690-1700.<sup>7</sup> In 1705 the Synod reinforced its own enactment of 1698, but almost from the outset some presbyteries were permitting qualified subscription from Latitudinarian-influenced licentiates.<sup>8</sup> Like most Synod clergy, Abernethy had attended university in Scotland. Born in Ulster, he had been sent to relations near Paisley to escape the War of 1689-91 that had seen all his siblings perish in the Londonderry siege. Another leading Belfast Society man, the Scots-born Kirkpatrick of Templepatrick and Belfast, was, like Abernethy, both a son of the manse and Glasgow graduate. His published sermon of October 1714 “*God’s Dominion over Kings and other Magistrates*” foreshadowed Abernethy’s in tone and emphasis.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Holmes, *Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 33-4.

<sup>6</sup> T. Witherow, *Historical and Literary Memorials of Presbyterianism in Ireland*, ii (Belfast, 1879), 159.

<sup>7</sup> Notably the General Assembly formula of 1694, replacing a prototype of 1690, C. G. M’Crie, *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1907), 227-31.

<sup>8</sup> Witherow, *Memorials*, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Witherow, *Memorials*, 157. Similar backgrounds apply to almost all the leading Society men, most of whom were representative of recent Scottish immigration.

A backlash from the Synod's old guard was inevitable. Following Abernethy's sermon, the Rev. John Malcolme responded by accusing him of "pretending to give new light to the world by putting personal persuasion in the room of church government and discipline".<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, as Professor J. Seaton Reid noted, "new-light [became] an epithet by which they were henceforth designated".<sup>11</sup> The traditionalists, often rural "frontiersmen", became dubbed Old Light in correlation. However, keen to claim for themselves the mantle of orthodoxy, the Belfast Society rejoined with *The Good Old Way*, showing their apparently "peculiar views ... were no novelties, but of old standing in the Church".<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, back over in Glasgow, views akin to New Light were being articulated by Abernethy's former student colleague, John Simson, Professor of Divinity 1708-29. Though not openly anti-subscriptionist, Simson's high-profile position had already landed him in trouble with his own Glasgow Presbytery. Accusations of heresy, principally on Arminian then Socinian grounds, from 1714 resulted in General Assembly warnings and eventual (in 1729) "indefinite" suspension. The Glasgow Presbytery had already collected money towards a church for beleaguered Old Lights in Belfast. Killen, referring to graduates returning to Ulster, would later blame the "mischievous character" of Simson with having "inoculated his students with those principles which led to their separation" from the mainstream Synod.<sup>13</sup> However, such "inoculating" influences likely owed more to quasi-

<sup>10</sup> From Malcolme's *Personal Persuasion no foundation for Religious Obedience*; Witherow, *Memorials*, 218-19.

<sup>11</sup> *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 241; Seaton Reid died in 1851, the final sections of his three-volume *History of The Presbyterian Church In Ireland* (1853) being completed by the markedly more conservative W. D. Killen.

<sup>12</sup> Witherow, *Memorials*, 222.

<sup>13</sup> Seaton Reid (Killen), *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 405, 416. In 1725 an accommodating Synod placed the non-subscribing clergy in a separate though affiliated "Presbytery of Antrim", but excluded them from communion the following year.

Unitarian views filtering through from London (sometimes via Dublin). Doctrinaire Calvinism had been under attack since the Cambridge Platonist era decades before, and received current impetus by “heterodox” writings notably by Whiston, Hoadly and Clarke. Killen blamed another Belfast Society man, Francis Hutcheson – appointed the year of Simson’s dismissal as Glasgow’s Professor of Moral Philosophy – and in turn William Leechman (Professor of Divinity and Principal from 1744) with continuing the process, resulting in the “impressionable minds” of the Synod’s “young-fry” being corrupted before returning home.<sup>14</sup>

The conservative Wodrow listed former students of William Hamilton, Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh 1709-32, as “practising” Arminians.<sup>15</sup> Some of these, while voicing anti-subscription sentiments in the privacy of Edinburgh clubs, connived for ordination purposes.<sup>16</sup> Grouped together in charges around the Borders, a suspicious Wodrow described them as “Neu-lights and Preachers-Legall”.<sup>17</sup> The contrast between the emboldened New Lights in Ulster and the dissembling of their Scottish counterparts was understandable: Presbyterians in Ulster were dissenters (if “unique” ones) but the accommodation of such elements within a Presbyterian Establishment (i.e. Scotland, which besides, as Mother Church was exemplar) seemed only to invite trouble.

Nonetheless, as the eighteenth century progressed, Enlightenment thought did influence a growing number of eminent Establishment churchmen, unsurprisingly (but not exclusively) Moderates. Though, like Hamilton and “his” protégés, the increasing adoption of a “rationalistic and un-theological faith”,<sup>18</sup> was generally more discreet

<sup>14</sup> *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 410, 412.

<sup>15</sup> H. Sefton, “Neu-lights and Preachers-Legall”, *Church, Politics and Society: Scotland 1408-1929*, ed. N. Macdougall (Edinburgh, 1983), 190.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-91.

<sup>17</sup> *Analecta*, iii, 360.

<sup>18</sup> A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church, 1688-1843* (Edinburgh, 1973), 111-12.

than witnessed since the 1700s in other countries.<sup>19</sup> Even in the Americas, the Synod of Philadelphia eventually felt obliged to take a formal pro-subscription line in 1729, where the New Light–Old Light controversy introduced largely by Ulster-Scots emigrants had raged openly.

### New Light and changing Secessionist mindsets

It was in protest at the “corruptions” of the Church of Scotland in “conforming to the spirit and sentiments” of a “degenerate age”,<sup>20</sup> that the Secessionist churches had been founded, feeding on other social/economic grievances held by the poorer and lower-middle classes largely forming their congregations. However, even in the conservative Secessionist synods (Burgher and Anti Burgher) the “leaven of new thought” gradually took effect.<sup>21</sup> But here it resulted additionally in a shift of opinion away from the Establishment principle. While previously faulting the Church of Scotland for perceived Erastianism (especially patronage), Secessionist New Light increasingly opposed Establishments *per se*: religion should be removed altogether from the sphere of the civil magistrate, who besides was seen to prop up subservient and endowment-receiving Establishments.

The “progressivism” of New Light Secessionists in challenging the established order, saw them eyed warily following the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. At the outset many Scottish Secessionists and Establishment clergy had looked favourably upon the overthrow of a corrupt monarchy. And, of course, recently, there had been clear (and more understandable – kin/religion based) sympathy amongst Scots

<sup>19</sup> C. Kidd, “Scotland’s Invisible Enlightenment: subscription and heterodoxy in the eighteenth century Kirk”, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, xxx (2000), 28-59.

<sup>20</sup> Seaton Reid (Killen), *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland*. 417.

<sup>21</sup> Drummond & Bulloch, *The Scottish Church*. 110.

Protestants for the American rebels.<sup>22</sup> However, as events in France descended into mob bloodlust, clerical sympathy for those engaged in “regime-change” evaporated. Yet Secessionist clergy remained tainted with non-conformist suspicion – especially so after the Republic assumed the status of regicide and wartime enemy from 1793, clamouring to protest their loyalty to the State.<sup>23</sup>

### The debate in the Burgher Synod, 1795-99

In contrast to the Old Light position, New Lights rejected individual acceptance of the “obligation of the National Covenants on posterity” as a pre-requisite for church fellowship. In the Burgher Synod, the leading New Light challengers of the existing Secessionist subscription (ordination) formula were Lawson of Selkirk, and Dick of Slateford. While not seeking to remodel the Secession’s 1736 *Judicial Testimony*, or even revise the existing formula of 1737, a preamble was sought allowing subscribers leeway in their personal interpretation of the civil magistrate’s authority in religious affairs, and the practical application of the Covenants (National and Solemn League).

Already by this point, the minister of the Burgher congregation in London, Archibald Hall, was openly condemning the Establishment principle<sup>24</sup> – though his location probably afforded him “permitted” anomaly status. But admittedly the new opinions were spreading. Yet the adoption by the Burgher Synod of an unobtrusive preamble – in contrast to actual Testimony and other key document revision – was most likely practical: from the year revision was first mooted (1795) the Anti Burgher Synod was already experiencing internal rupture over its own New Light drive for Testimony revision – despite the opposition being modest in clerical numbers if not in tone.

<sup>22</sup> See R. Donovan, “Evangelical Civic Humanism in Glasgow: The American War Sermons of William Thom” in A. Hook & R. B. Sher, eds. *Glasgow Enlightenment* (East Linton, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> H. W. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow, 1912), 198-200.

<sup>24</sup> G. Struthers, *History of the Relief Church* (Glasgow, 1843), 385.

Hence while the prefix to the Formula eventually adopted by the Burgher Synod in 1799 contained the phrase “You are not required to approve of ... compulsory principles in religion”,<sup>25</sup> and other wording permitting personal interpretation of continued Covenant obligation, there was no explicit remodelling of the Secessionist “canon” (the hold of which on conscience could now though be circumvented) or actual abjuration of the civil magistrate’s authority. Thus, as McKerrow (himself a Burgher New Light) later stated, it “differed materially” from the revision being undertaken by the Anti Burghers.<sup>26</sup> But from the outset a handful protested vociferously – foremost Willis of Greenock, whose pamphlet *A Smooth Stone from the Brook* was later described as “a stone being aimed in the forehead of Dr Lawson”.<sup>27</sup> Other works continued the theme, for example Thomson’s 128-page *The Confession, Covenants and Secession Testimony vindicated and defended*,<sup>28</sup> which included verse such as

O, Fraser Dick, and Lawson you have spread  
 Your snares o’er Tabor Mount and Mispeh’s head,  
 Secession principles and solemn vows,  
 Which once, with heart and hand, you did espouse,  
 You’ve much obscured, deserted and opposed;  
 Inconstancy in all, you have disclosed.  
 Our Bethels now into Bethavens turn’d;  
 At Covenants and Testimonies you have spurn’d.

In October 1799 the handful of protesting ministers and elders met in Glasgow promptly forming the Associate Presbytery (poignantly, the name used between 1733-44 by the first Erskine-led Secession).<sup>29</sup> From

<sup>25</sup> R. Small, *History Of The Congregations Of The United Presbyterian Church*, ii (Edinburgh, 1904), 552.

<sup>26</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 579.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 40.

the outset they, like their antecedents in Ulster and the American colonies, were nicknamed Old Lights.

### Original Burgher statistics and chronology

Their initial number of three ministers was within a year augmented by another eleven (five with adhering congregations).<sup>30</sup> Boasting twenty congregations by 1805, a Synod was formed comprising three presbyteries. Although largely provincial in flavour, a showpiece church (replacing a tent) was built in Glasgow’s East Campbell Street.<sup>31</sup> It stood diagonally across from the Burgher church of 1789, itself retained by the New Lights but at a costly membership loss of 400.<sup>32</sup>

In a similar scenario to the New Light Burghers and, in turn, their United Secession/United Presbyterian successors, Glasgow proved a relative stronghold for the Original Burghers. The “commercial ethos” permeating the city from the late eighteenth century probably explains greater Secessionist representation than in an Edinburgh dominated by a professional-aristocratic class.<sup>33</sup> But, quite likely, success in Glasgow also owed much to a fairly settled ministry (notably Watson, Turnbull and Willis junior) – with the same being true for their Anti-Burgher counterparts in Edinburgh (M’Crie and Paxton).

Money – or lack of it – was a problem for the Original Burgher Synod, with a membership not only meagre in numbers but almost certainly poorer per head (things were little different in the Anti-Burgher camp). By contrast, in 1840 McKerrow recalled that New Light Burghers had generally “been favoured with a high degree of external prosperity”.<sup>34</sup> In 1809 Synod had to remind presbyteries of their duty to adequately remunerate not only probationers but also incumbents.<sup>35</sup> The

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>32</sup> Small, *United Presbyterian Church*, ii, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Hook & Sher (eds.), *Glasgow Enlightenment*, (intro.) 3.

<sup>34</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 578.

<sup>35</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 45.

former were to be paid a guinea per week<sup>36</sup> – a ruling, it seems, more honoured in the breach.

Wrangles over buildings at the “split” of 1799-1800 were usually decided by compromise, or by courts in favour of the majority. A few Old Light bodies hung on, waiting on the outcome of a case involving the Perth Burgher church to set a favourable precedent. In a protracted and costly struggle lasting twenty years, and involving several appeals to the Court of Session and House of Lords, Old and New Lights used the church alternately until the former withdrew in 1820.<sup>37</sup> The famed “Craigdallie Case” did set a precedent favouring those adhering to “founding beliefs” in church property disputes – but paradoxically not at Perth, due to an inability to decide what party represented this.<sup>38</sup>

Presbyteries in Down and Derry were created, with congregations in Ulster having been petitioning for sermon since 1811.<sup>39</sup> Of the nine Ulster congregations who connected themselves with Scottish Old Light Secessionists, eight joined the Original Burgher Synod.<sup>40</sup> The Burgher Synod of Ireland (New Light, and in part-subordination to its Scottish equivalent) contained over seventy congregations in 1818. Scotland’s Secessionists had conducted their own operations amongst Ulster-Scots Presbyterian emigrants almost from the outset – both Burgher and Anti Burgher presbyteries being formed (reflecting the Scottish “Breach” of 1747) by 1750.

### **Returning to the fold: Original Burghers and union, 1815-39**

Intermittent attempts at union negotiations with the Burgher New Lights (United Secession from 1820), and Anti Burgher Old Lights (Constitutional Presbytery, then Original Secession Synod) proved unsuccessful – for reasons discussed below. However, as time wore on,

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Small, *United Presbyterian Church*, 552-4.

<sup>38</sup> N. R. Needham, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* [DSCHT], ed. N. M. de S. Cameron (Edinburgh, 1993), 221-22.

<sup>39</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 51, 60, 273.

<sup>40</sup> Names and statistics contained in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, ch. 8.

Burgher Old Lights began eyeing a more respectable match in the form of the Established Church.

The *Church of Scotland Magazine* for September 1834 referred to the “Union of the Orthodox Seceders with the Church of Scotland” as “an event earnestly to be desired”, complimenting the “small but respectable bodies”. Already for two decades, the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor* had championed the Old Light divine Thomas M’Crie almost as defender of the Faith against growing forces deemed hostile to Protestantism – despite the body of “Orthodox Seceders” he represented, i.e. Anti Burgher in origin, being the smaller and less tractable of the two groupings. Now, with the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829), Reform Bill (1832), and a general increase in agnostic scepticism, it appeared to the *Magazine* that “the enemy comes in like a flood ... from quarters most opposite ... an ominous combination ... of Infidels, Heretics, Papists and evangelical Protestants”.<sup>41</sup> These disparate strands had been drawn together by “the influence of error, and not of truth”.<sup>42</sup> Over in the redoubt of Ulster, a Synod driven by self-preservation enforced unqualified subscription to the Westminster Confession in 1835. Fearful Synod New Lights in the Province began to see the error of their ways, with moreover the descendants of the Belfast Society showing their true colours by openly embracing Socinianism.<sup>43</sup> For much the same reasons, Ulster’s former New Light Secessionists – who had not scrupled at receiving the small endowment of *regium donum* – began favouring the Evangelical cause over the liberal Voluntaryism now championed by the United Secession.<sup>44</sup>

Next month the *Magazine* featured a letter with whose sentiments the editorial claimed to be “entirely in accord”.<sup>45</sup> The writer conceded

<sup>41</sup> *Church of Scotland Magazine*, Feb. 1838, 63.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Seaton Reid (Killen), *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, 578-81.

<sup>44</sup> The Synod of Ulster and Secession Synod would unite as the Irish Presbyterian Church in 1840.

<sup>45</sup> *Church of Scotland Magazine*, Oct. 1834, 326.

that previously most Establishment clergy had little interest in what seemed “petty sectarian disputes” within the Secession, and the common notion “that those denominated Old Light were precise sticklers for antiquated opinions, and wanton schismatics from their more illumined and liberalized brethren”.<sup>46</sup>

However, in light of mounting attacks on the Established Church, it was observed: “It is a good effect of hostile attacks on existing institutions, that they tend to bring more closely together ... the true friends of these institutions ... [who themselves] had been contending *without the pale of the Establishment* for old and valuable principles”.<sup>47</sup> The noble stance of the Old Light groups in each effecting (in 1799, 1806, and 1821) a “separation from their brethren” was “to undeceive others ... in danger of being taken by the plausible pretensions and flimsy arguments of the Voluntaries”.<sup>48</sup>

A comparison was drawn between the “old” Establishment – one characterised by Erastian time-servers – and a “reviving and progressing” Church of Scotland, an emotive appeal invoked the memory of the Secessionist Fathers in a revived Establishment’s cause. These very men would now surely be at the forefront of its defence – against the Erastian enemy within, and the Voluntary-Infidel-Papist coalition without. The piece did however conclude with the acknowledgement that the abolition of patronage, not its mere checking, was paramount for Old Lights – but reaffirming Evangelical opposition to patronage, emphasised “In the event of union ... you will contend for this with the greater advantage”.<sup>49</sup>

A final inducement-cum-safeguard, that, on union, “Moreover ... your own churches, at least, will be secured against any interference by patrons”,<sup>50</sup> proved doubly ironic. Alluding to the newly passed Chapels Act, which gave the (largely Evangelical-dominated) chapels-of-ease

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 320-21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Church of Scotland Magazine*, Oct. 1834, 324-25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

ecclesiastical equality with civil parishes, such *quoad sacra* status would be granted to Original Burgher churches. However following the unobtrusive union of July 1839, the appearance of one such “new” parish church eventually led to the Court of Session’s infamous “Stewarton judgement” (January 1843), something effectively annulling the 1834 Chapels Act and thus robbing the Evangelicals of the extra representation they themselves had enjoyed in the Church courts. The Stewarton judgement “made the Disruption practically inevitable”.<sup>51</sup>

Letters and articles on the theme continued to appear in the principal Establishment periodicals. The *Church of Scotland Magazine* for October 1838, defended Old Light Burghers from a recent satire in the *Voluntary Church Magazine*. The arch-polemicist Andrew Marshall’s organ had mocked previous Original Burgher “courting” and “flirting” attempts at union with other Secessionist bodies, and described their present designs “upon no less a Madam than Old Mother Kirk herself” as being (in reference to endowments) “not so much love as a cash affair”.<sup>52</sup> More concerned than spiteful at the prospect of the Original Burghers re-entering the Establishment, were Moderates. With the Ten Years’ Conflict well under way, the prospect of the Evangelicals receiving further strength was not a welcoming one for Dr George Cook (Moderate leader from the early 1820s), William Pirie, and others. A report in the *Church of Scotland Magazine* of the 1838 General Assembly, detailed Moderate opposition voiced to proposed union. Their foresighted claim that it would “accelerate the destruction of the Church”, was deemed by the *Magazine* only to make sense if the destruction referred to Erastian elements within – but referred to Cook’s logic as otherwise “strange indeed”.<sup>53</sup> At the same Assembly, Evangelicals – in response to Moderate questioning of Burgher academic proficiency – called to their defence Dr Brunton, Professor of

<sup>51</sup> A. Herron, *DSCHT*, 797.

<sup>52</sup> *Voluntary Church Magazine*, June 1838.

<sup>53</sup> *Church of Scotland Magazine*, July 1838, 248-49.

Hebrew at Edinburgh, who testified to the high standards of the Original Burghers' divinity curriculum.<sup>54</sup>

Of the forty-one Original Burgher ministers in Scotland,<sup>55</sup> thirty-one would immediately or soon after accede to the Established Church. Following what was a fairly amicable separation, the remaining group retained the title of Original Burgher Synod (commonly referred to as the Remanent Synod) until the union of 1842, before which one apiece had joined the United Secession and the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

### **Anti Burgher strife 1791-1806 – and the formation of the Constitutional Presbytery**

An internal dispute had affected the General Associate Synod since 1791, when overtures were received from the Glasgow and Forfar presbyteries requesting revision of the Secession Testimony due to its apparent sanction of the civil magistrate's interference in religion. Within a year the Rev. James Aitken of Kirriemuir was marshalling opposition to change, and along with seven colleagues formally objected in 1793.<sup>56</sup>

An initial draft having been prepared in 1792, from 1796 numerous Synod sederunts were spent in revising what was adopted in 1804 as the *Narrative and Testimony*, both documents having been separate and published and enacted in 1801 and 1803 respectively.<sup>57</sup> McKerrow (writing 35 years after the event and justifying New Light) stated “a desire to simplify” prompted revision as “the distinguishing principles of the Secessionist Church had hitherto been scattered throughout a number of publications”.<sup>58</sup> These “publications” included two constituting the *Bond*, namely the *Acknowledgement of Sins* and the

<sup>54</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 68.

<sup>55</sup> The five in Ireland making separate arrangements – see Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 76.

<sup>56</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 431-33.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 433-34.

<sup>58</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 433-34.

*Engagement of Duties.*<sup>59</sup> Church members had been expected to give their assent to these, essentially Covenanting, documents (the early Seceders had renewed the National and Solemn League Covenants in 1743). In 1799 Synod renewed its act of May 1796 respecting its own subscription formula (the modification of which alone sufficed the Burghers several months later) – when a clause had been inserted to satisfy two licentiates (one in particular) uneasy at wording in the Confession of Faith respecting the civil magistrate.<sup>60</sup>

The entire affair having dragged on for considerably longer than in the Burgher Synod – where the complex issue of multiple document revision had been obviated – schism eventually occurred in August 1806, and the Constitutional Presbytery formed at Whitburn (where the Rev. Archibald Bruce – recent Professor of Divinity at the Anti Burgher “Theological Hall” since 1786 – retained his church). Its deed of constitution ran to some 4000 words,<sup>61</sup> a wily stubbornness evident throughout the text.

In all probability, the protestors’ departure was a mere formality. But following the Original Burgher “split” in 1799, and with numbers even more meagre, at first sight their continued but protesting Synod presence until 1806 largely may appear as the actions of obstinate self-publicists. But perceived (if self-styled) as the faithful remnant of the Secessionist cause, their dogged persistence becomes more logical. Moreover, M’Crie’s actions then, and in subsequent years, evinced some flexibility. Furthermore, their opposition to Disestablishment (later Voluntary) views gaining ground in the New Light Synods, meant the leading Protestors, as with the Original Burghers, could style themselves as foremost enemies of a “new” evil. Admittedly the relevance of this was probably lost on rank-and-file Old Light. But surprisingly – and despite a relatively stagnant membership base – the consequence of their stance for the “good old ways” would before long

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 381-82, 435.

<sup>61</sup> Reproduced in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 81-90.

be a complimentary make-over by Establishment Evangelicals, themselves seeing Old Light in terms anew.

Of the pamphlets immediately published by the protestors, the titles of two perhaps suffice: Hog's "Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein" (Jeremiah vi.16); and Turnbull's "Old Lights better than pretended New" subtitled (Luke v.39) "No man also having drunk old wine, straightway desireth new; for he saith the old is better".<sup>62</sup> Appearing the following year, was M'Crie's *Statement of the Difference between the Profession of the Reformed Church of Scotland as adopted by the Seceders and the Profession contained in the New Testimony and other Acts lately adopted by the General Associate Synod, particularly on the power of Civil Magistrates respecting Religion, &c.*<sup>63</sup> This would be republished by the conservative Free Church scholar George Smeaton in 1871, as part of a campaign to undermine union negotiations with the United Presbyterians.

With regard to what appears to have been a broad Anti Burgher drift towards New Light, one might expect to find that a body so apparently fractious and pedantic as to have separated themselves over the wording of a Burgess Oath, would have been less susceptible to the imbibing of the new ideas by the century's end. However, statistics attest otherwise, with only four minisers forming the Constitutional Presbytery, a body experiencing little real growth thereafter. Continued exposure to Enlightenment thought, an enhanced education in general, growing contact with differing religious outlooks in the milieu of large towns and cities (to which rural Anti Burghers increasingly moved with the trend in rural depopulation) and – linked to both these factors – increased economic prosperity, all contributed to the erosion of a Covenanting-era mindset. Even M'Crie junior, in *Life of Thomas M'Crie DD* (a tribute to his late father) conceded "a variety of

<sup>62</sup> Both listed in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 98.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

circumstances combined to produce this change ... events and opinions which accompanied the political agitations of the close of the last century”.<sup>64</sup> But, like Scott, M’Crie fails to mention New Light credentials pre-dating events in Paris by a century, portraying it almost as a gimmick – one fortuitously aided by “external” factors to affect the religious climate.

The Constitutional Presbytery’s founding quaternion asserted more ministers and probationers would have followed them but for fear of losing their livelihood.<sup>65</sup> Even before 1806, “intact” Anti Burgher congregations, particularly in provincial areas, were frequently ridden with debt, something a perusal of Small’s statistics will attest. But conversely, the “pulpit artiste” effect held by many ministers of the era, especially in small towns (or over the small-town minded) may have been a factor in the Anti Burgher Old Lights having much representation beyond that on paper. Revealingly, although M’Crie was followed “out” by half his Edinburgh congregation – this included only three of eleven elders.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the Edinburgh elders were less impressionable than those gathered round M’Crie’s colleagues in the backwaters of Whitburn (though where the impressive Bruce had been the incumbent for 38 years), Kirriemuir (Aitken) and Kelso (Hog).

Admittedly the Burgher Old Light “defection” of 1799 seemed to have been rooted in wider clerical grassroots support, despite having attracted few distinguished figures; even Willis of Greenock, its foremost minister, enjoyed little prominence in the Associate Synod before then. Perhaps the “negative” schismatic precedent set by the Original Burghers, and their relatively lean existence since, by 1806 sufficed to discourage most empathising Anti Burghers – with only the clout held by the eminent pairing of Bruce and M’Crie enough to effect the 1806 “split”.

<sup>64</sup> M’Crie, *Life of Thomas M’Crie*, 44.

<sup>65</sup> Supplementary Declaration VIII, Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 89-90.

<sup>66</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 323.

Details of Aitken's activities in what appears a preparatory period before (and immediately after) his departure from the Synod, sound distinctly like church-poaching. Complaints reached Synod of his baptism of children of parents "still lying under scandal" and "excluded from communion" in neighbouring churches – hardly the actions of a cleric wont to descry falling standards elsewhere. Similarly – and an accusation levelled against other defecting Old Lights (though probably not the noble-minded M'Crie, nor later Stevenson) – attestations were being refused to people of good standing wishing to join other local churches.<sup>67</sup> Scott's tribute to Aitken makes no mention of such allegations, instead fêting the memory of his fine physical appearance and resounding voice, and the manner in which on Fast-day preceding communion Sunday his congregation lined up to receive a "counsel", or a "rebuke" in the form of an individualised "marvellously apt" passage of Scripture. "It was as if a Refiner sat, fan in hand, purging his barn floor".<sup>68</sup>

This is part of Scott's lengthy homage to the "four protesting brethren", a eulogy comparing them (man for man) with the "first four seceders" of 1733, and indignantly "recalling" how they were "summarily deposed ... of such conduct the descendants of the New Lights may fell justly ashamed" (as Scott was writing in the 1880s, presumably the United Presbyterians had to bear this burden).<sup>69</sup>

But Synod minutes detailing attempts to reconcile the group tell another story:<sup>70</sup> eventual deposition took place *after* the brethren had formed the Constitutional Presbytery and (though understandably, having declined its authority) repeatedly ignored Synod summons.<sup>71</sup> The sentence was not applied to Hog of Kelso, discreetly "suspended" being terminally ill.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 451.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Extracts reproduced in McKerrow, *Secession Church*.

<sup>71</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 456.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

A paradox of the affair, was that one of the two licentiates whose complaints in 1796 regarding wording in the Confession of Faith relating to the civil magistrates – the event precipitating formula revision – was the young Thomas M’Crie himself (then being ordained to the Edinburgh Potterrow congregation). This seeming *volte-face* appears to have been taken only after some soul-searching. But Scott does not mention the awkward “detail”. The irony was not, however, lost on the Voluntary McKerrow, who remarked “It is rather singular that the sentiments of Mr M’Crie should have undergone such a rapid change ... In 1796, he refused to submit to ordination until synod gave relief to his conscience, by passing an act ... In 1800 he petitioned that this act should be reviewed and rescinded”.<sup>73</sup> Naturally, M’Crie junior, writing contemporaneously with McKerrow, attempted to justify his late father, if somewhat awkwardly. Aware of the deprecating Voluntary view of the affair, one he termed “a mis-representation”, it was claimed M’Crie senior had no idea of the implication of his 1796 protest, and in fact had “no settled opinion on the subject ... but ... aware that the new opinions had of late become general in the body ... thought it wrong that they should continue to tie down young men to principles which they themselves no longer held”.<sup>74</sup> Apparently while the matter was still under Synod “*sub judice*” he even privately hoped it “would issue in a judgement favourable to the union between Church and State”.<sup>75</sup> Yet the account confusingly ends by stating “It is undeniable, however, that his leanings were originally in favour of the new doctrines”, attributing this to “early prepossessions” later realised as folly (and making comparison with Saul of Tarsus, Knox and Luther in such respects).<sup>76</sup> More realistically, it is tempting to view M’Crie’s change of heart as simply a “gut-feeling” – not yet fully comprehended in even his own logic, but which in time would be vindicated as the

<sup>73</sup> McKerrow, *Secession Church*, 437.

<sup>74</sup> M’Crie, *Life of Thomas M’Crie*, 92.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

New Light he early toyed with developed into a “viper in the bosom” of the Protestant faith.

M’Crie junior provides further information on the Old Light clique that suggests initial flexibility on the issue of the “new” opinions was wider-held; though, again, this may simply represent further exoneration of his father. Hog, it is claimed, had for a while toyed with New Light, before “more deliberate examination induced him to adopt” the opposite view.<sup>77</sup> Even Aitken had apparently been involved in the initial drafting of the *Narrative and Testimony* in 1791.<sup>78</sup>

While Bruce at Whitburn and Hog at Kelso retained their churches, M’Crie and Aitken were less fortunate. The former found himself at the wrong end of a Court of Session decision of 1809, but by 1813 his followers were able to build their own church – later named M’Crie Free.<sup>79</sup> At Kirriemuir Aitken’s party were immediately deprived of their church,<sup>80</sup> meeting in a tent until their own edifice was quickly built (and apparently obstructing the local New Light party from worshipping in the old church).

In the twenty-one years of its existence until union with the Synod of Protestors in 1827, the history of the Constitutional Presbytery was unremarkable, and its growth – even in comparison with the modest increase experienced by the Original Burghers during the period – negligible. The trickle of students attending the four eight-week annual sessions in the “Divinity Hall”,<sup>81</sup> included two sons of the manse in both Aitken and M’Crie junior. Following ordination, each was eagerly sought by congregations where a varied supply of sermon had normally been the best hoped for. In 1811 Aitken junior, rushed through his

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>79</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 323.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

<sup>81</sup> Located on a peripatetic basis, e.g. normally at Professor Rev. Bruce’s Whitburn “barracks” until his death in 1816, then periodically with M’Crie in Edinburgh, in addition to Turnbull’s Glasgow meetings: Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 605-6.

training and licensed in half the usual time “owing to [a] paucity of probationers”,<sup>82</sup> chose Aberdeen over Kelso (without an incumbent since Hog’s death in 1806) and Glasgow.<sup>83</sup> The western metropolis might have been a high-profile location but the congregation was a mere handful receiving occasional supply and meeting in temporary accommodation. Cleland’s *Annals of Glasgow*, published in 1816, gives the total membership for the “Old Light Anti Burghers”, then meeting in King Street, as sixty.<sup>84</sup> M’Crie continued in his Edinburgh charge until his death in 1835, his reputation ensuring a respectable turnout (for the Constitutional Presbytery, then the Original Secession Synod) in the city. It was a fame stemming chiefly from his acclaimed *Life of John Knox* (2 volumes, 1811, 1813) and, to a lesser extent, *Life of Andrew Melville* (2 volumes, 1819, 1824), biographies venerated then and since by Evangelicals.

In a similar situation to that referred to above with the Original Burghers, a number of small, and for the most part rural, congregations were formed with Constitutional Presbytery status in the decades after 1806. That of Haddington came in almost immediately, its subsequent history being comparatively harmonious – but this was due probably to the stability provided by its minister (Robert Chalmers) who continued in the charge until 1834. More typical were congregations existing in villages, usually and frequently never without a pastor, for example Balmullo and Carnoustie respectively, which frequently disappear off record for long periods. Others dwindled following incumbent death, for example Kelso and Falkirk; Kelso had eventually received a “replacement” for Hog, but by 1821 could not afford to pay any stipend.<sup>85</sup> Easily the most far-flung congregation – that of Birsay on the Secessionist stronghold of Orkney – was a long-term survivor, still functioning as an Original United Secession church in Scott’s time.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 361-2.

<sup>84</sup> J. Cleland, *Annals of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1816), 140.

<sup>85</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 332-3, 362-3.

### Anti Burgher Old Light augmentation and union, 1821-1827

September 1820 saw the formation of the United Secession Church, an event for years sought by most New Lights in both Burgher and Anti Burgher Synods.<sup>86</sup> The former brought in all their congregations; the latter, despite the abolishment of the Burgess Oath the year before, did not quite experience the same degree of unanimity and acquiescence in its ranks – a conservative “clique”, led by Professor Paxton and Dr Stevenson forming the “Synod of Protestors” in May 1821.

However, in contrast to the debates and ruptures of 1799-1806, the departure of 1820 was fairly amicable, regret being mutually expressed and pamphlets comparatively free of railing language.<sup>87</sup> As Paxton had been the Anti Burgher Synod’s Divinity Professor since 1807, the new United Secession Synod expressed “their well-founded approbation” for his services rendered.<sup>88</sup> There seems little doubt that, in a similar situation to that involving the formation of the Constitutional Presbytery, the personal appeal and reputation of the leading men behind the initial protest was the principal factor in precipitating another rupture. The ministers following their example were relatively unknown, the majority of whom one suspects would have complied with union, if resignedly so – Mitchell of Clola probably being the exception. Again, several were forced to vacate churches. One early accession, by the Rev. James Templeton of Aberdeen, owed “probably to the bonds of relationship”,<sup>89</sup> Templeton being son-in-law to the “patriarchal” Mitchell of Clola.<sup>90</sup> Later, in 1827, ostensibly rather than unite with the Constitutional Presbytery, Templeton joined the United Secession (where his heart had probably been since 1820). Conveniently, by this time Mitchell was “in his dotage”, and believing every day to be Sunday, daily wandered the community reproving

<sup>86</sup> Their previously “subordinate” Synods in Ireland had united in 1818.

<sup>87</sup> Titles listed in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 118-9.

<sup>88</sup> Extract from Synod minute reproduced in Scott, *Original Secession Church*.

104.

<sup>89</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 244.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

“Sabbath-breakers”.<sup>91</sup> Although the reputation of the most feared Old Light of all, Paxton, seems to have cut no ice with his own daughters, two of whom married United Secession ministers,<sup>92</sup> Scott refers to another ten or so other ministers who empathised with the protestors in 1820-1, but who “however, contenting themselves with their exoneration, acceded” (that is, to the United Secession).<sup>93</sup>

The rationale of the protestors was straightforward, and clarified by Dr Stevenson in April 1820: an expected further downgrading of the importance attached to the *Judicial Testimony* and other constitutional documents following expected union. Another reason was “because no suitable provision is made … for guarding … against what is called free communion” – referring chiefly to the Relief Church. The Relief Church divine and historian Struthers remarked that the Relief’s open communion policy (and inter-denominational “pulpit-swapping”, plus downplaying of the Covenants) saw them abhorred by traditionalists; hence their exclusion from the 1819-20 talks as the negotiating Synods attempted to reconcile Paxton’s group – who “would have darted off like a rocket if the Relief had been mentioned”.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, despite the removal of the Burgess Oath, the Protestors – with Paxton doubtless exerting much influence – still demanded an apology from the former Burghers, that is, “a pointed testimony against several sinful and snaring oaths”.<sup>95</sup>

Almost from the outset, the main agenda for the Synod of Protestors was union with all holding Original Secession values (namely themselves and the Constitutional Presbytery). That it was no simple task to reconcile bodies standing, until recently, theoretically in separate camps, seems clear. An overture from the Synod’s Ayr

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>94</sup> G. Struthers, *History of the Relief Church* (Glasgow, 1843), 449.

<sup>95</sup> Reproduced in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 101-2.

Presbytery pressing for union was received as early as 1822.<sup>96</sup> With probationers voicing similar sentiments, the following year Synod sent an “epistle” enquiring “whether it is practicable to heal the breach which hath divided us”.<sup>97</sup> But the next day the “indomitable” Paxton, on failing to have the letter re-phrased, insisted it be marked in the minutes “That he is not to be considered as approving of it”.<sup>98</sup>

Yet negotiations were soon proceeding formally. After two years of joint-Committee meetings, spent mostly forming new assertory articles, then a statement of principles (the latter resulting in the *Original Secession Testimony* drawn up in its historical and doctrinal “halves” by M’Crie and Stevenson respectively) union occurred in May 1827.<sup>99</sup>

The newly-formed Original Secession Synod had some twenty ministers, nineteen following Templeton’s “defection”. Almost the first topic of consideration was the question of union with the Original Burghers. However, from the start Paxton (appointed Divinity Professor by the OSS) opposed reconciliation. On a conference eventually taking place in 1832, Paxton’s “stern band” continued to demand an unreserved apology for the Burgess Oath. One delegate<sup>100</sup> later contrasted M’Crie’s “earnest and conciliatory” position with Paxton’s “unbending and obstructive” one; the latter forced the “aged Dr Stevenson ... to retire to the vestry and there to shed tears”.<sup>101</sup>

### **Old Light re-ignited, and the influence of Thomas M’Crie**

Already for years M’Crie had shown himself no sectary, but one ready to negotiate in light of a changing thought-climate he saw as inimical to

<sup>96</sup> On formation the Synod created three presbyteries: Perth, Ayr, and Aberdeen. Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 107.

<sup>97</sup> Letter reproduced in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 108-9.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>100</sup> William Taylor, Original Burgher minister of Perth – Small, *United Presbyterian Church*, ii, 554; Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 60-61.

<sup>101</sup> Taylor’s “Biographical Notices”, p. 167, reproduced in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 60-61.

the Faith. In this respect he was finding a growing number of Evangelical allies within the Church of Scotland. In 1821 he criticised the newly-formed United Secession, while defending the Establishment principle in *Two Discourses on Unity of the Church*.<sup>102</sup> Writing to Sir George Sinclair of Ulbster, Establishment Evangelical nobleman, in 1824, M’Crie could “rejoice that, of late, the number of evangelical and pious ministers in the Church of Scotland has increased” – but admitted the abolition of patronage would be required before union could be considered.<sup>103</sup> In a speech to the Anti-Patronage Society late in 1824, Sinclair complimented the Old Lights’ “enlightened ministers and pious congregations, whose creed and discipline are otherwise entirely in accordance with our own”.<sup>104</sup>

Back in 1812 the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor* (edited by the leading Evangelical Andrew Thomson) extolled M’Crie’s *Life of John Knox* in a two-part article. There was admiration for a man writing “in opposition to those who have industriously held [Knox] up, for the purpose of maliciously calumniating his character”.<sup>105</sup> In this respect, particular reference was made in the concluding part of the article to “the unfairness of Hume’s statements and inferences”.<sup>106</sup> In July 1817 the *Instructor* rallied to M’Crie’s defence against a cabal of “High Church Episcopalians” who in the *British Critic* had savaged his *Vindication of the Scottish Presbyterians and Covenanters*.<sup>107</sup> The latter itself had been a riposte to the crypto-Episcopalian Walter Scott’s *Tales of My Landlord*. The *Instructor* ridiculed the Anglicans’ piece as part of “the trash that is lodged monthly, in the oblivious pages of that oblivious journal”.<sup>108</sup> Compliments to M’Crie continued, including the

<sup>102</sup> Small, *United Presbyterian Church*, i, 445.

<sup>103</sup> M’Crie, *Life of Thomas M’Crie*, 291-98.

<sup>104</sup> *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, January 1825, 46-7.

<sup>105</sup> *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, August 1812, 117.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 1812, 182.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1817, 48.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

whimsical notion that he, like the “illustrious Blondel”, might be “chosen as the public and authorised defender of the Protestant faith”.<sup>109</sup>

### **Postponing the inevitable: union negotiations and the formation of the Original United Secession**

Nonetheless, there seemed little prospect of the Old Light Anti Burgher bodies re-entering the Establishment during these decades, and probably none after M’Crie’s death in 1835. And although Paxton himself departed in 1837, the reactionary mantle passed to James Wright, his associate at Infirmary Street from 1834. Wright continued to lead opposition to suggested Original Secession Synod union talks with the Original Burghers.<sup>110</sup>

Yet his intransigence could serve only as a check. With the accession of three-quarters of the Original Burgher Synod to the Established Church in 1839, the opportunity for Original Secession Synod augmentation through uniting with the Burgher remanents seemed only sensible. Numerically speaking, the fortunes of the Original Secession Synod were clearly in decline, with the death of “eminent leaders (particularly M’Crie – Paxton’s may have seemed a boon to some), and the feeble health of other[s]”,<sup>111</sup> exacerbating an ongoing funds crisis that saw many congregations treat pastors with “extreme parsimony”.<sup>112</sup>

Further facts relating to isolated Original Secession Synod churches contrast with the “elite” congregations of M’Crie and Stevenson in Edinburgh and Ayr. In 1839 the Ayr Presbytery of the Original Secession Synod dealt with what amounted to witchcraft amongst its Toberdoney congregation in Antrim, including an elder using charms on bewitched cows.<sup>113</sup> While in 1836, a suggestion to introduce a stove

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 1825, 783. David Blondel (d. 1655), Calvinist French clergyman and historian.

<sup>110</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 135.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-34.

into an unnamed “country” church for heating, was resisted since “the minister with his hearty preaching was the right stove, whilst that of blackened iron was a limb of the apocalyptic beast which should be excluded from the sanctuary”.<sup>114</sup>

Union in the form of the *Synod of United Original Seceders* (United Original Secession Church) took place in May 1842 at (fittingly) the late M’Crie’s Davie Street church. The 1827 Testimony was effectively retained, slightly altered to appease any lingering resentment over the Burgess Oath: “both parties [see] it to be their duty to refrain from swearing the Burgess Oath should it be re-enacted”.<sup>115</sup> This was simply a sop to old Anti Burgher pride, as the oath was now obsolete. Only one Burgher remnant felt sufficiently offended to remain aloof – joining the Reformed Presbyterian Church instead.<sup>116</sup> But conversely, the refusal to demand an explicit apology provoked one final Anti Burgher Old Light break-off. This clique of two ministers and one “ruling elder”, predictably formed around Wright, adopted the venerated title of the Associate Presbytery (the *Associate Presbytery of Original Seceders*). The microscopic denomination, with a subsequent existence of over half a century, was itself soon split by faction.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

To recapitulate: the turn-of-the-century “Auld Licht” defections from both Burgher and Anti Burgher Synods having been relatively small groups (something not always appreciated), almost from the outset they were regarded – even in Secessionist let alone wider terms – as little more than a stubborn residue, destined for steady decline pending extinction. But contrary to expectations, the Secessionist Old Light cause was revitalised, largely by issues of wider national significance. An increased awareness and respect accrued to them, as their more

<sup>114</sup> Reproduced in Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 467.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 602-3.

<sup>117</sup> See A. McWhirter, “The Last Anti-Burghers: A Footnote to Secessionist History”, *RSCHS*, viii (1944), 254-91.

numerous erstwhile brethren of New Light (leading to Voluntary) persuasion evolved into the greatest threat to the continued efficiency of the Established Church. Contrasting with these “liberal” Protestants, who by 1830 seemed (if unwittingly) to be leading an unholy alliance against the Faith, were the faithful Old Lights. And despite still containing within their ranks some decidedly curious characters, the rehabilitation of these “Anti-Voluntary Dissenters” as legitimate heirs of (increasingly in an Establishment where Evangelicals were coming to the fore) revered Secessionist Fathers – amongst whom a nineteenth-century Knox arose in the form of Thomas M’Crie – provided the Evangelicals with a valuable ally in the fight against Erastianism, Voluntaryism, and a rising tide in secular “denial”.

A mere glance at the statistics of the Original Secession Church shows a continued existence in excess of a century beyond the chronological limit of the above narrative – with the denomination maintaining a separate (and increasingly curious) existence until its handful of congregations re-entered the Church of Scotland (one joining the Free Church) in 1956. However, the only events during this period even remotely impinging on national events were the initial nine years of wearisome negotiations eventually resulting in 18 of the 31 United Original Secession ministers entering the Free Church in April 1852, during which time the pro- and anti-union wings<sup>118</sup> were led not inappropriately by M’Crie junior and Aitken junior respectively.<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, the years 1839-42 effectively form a closing chapter in Old Light/Original Secession history – a conclusion to which the century-plus following is but a long postscript.

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<sup>118</sup> The latter continued the insistence that the perpetual obligation of the 1638 and 1643 Covenants, and not simply the 1690s Revolution Settlement, be an actual term of communion – something an accommodating act passed by the Free Church in May 1851 had fallen short of.

<sup>119</sup> Scott, *Original Secession Church*, 197.